Syracuse University

SURFACE at Syracuse University

Center for Policy Research

Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs

2-2005

Holding Accountability Programs Accountable

John Yinger
The Maxwell School, Syracuse University, joyinger@syr.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://surface.syr.edu/cpr

 Part of the Economic Policy Commons, Economics Commons, Education Policy Commons, and the Public Policy Commons

Recommended Citation

J. Yinger, 2005. "Holding Accountability Programs Accountable," It's Elementary, February.

This Policy Comment is brought to you for free and open access by the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at SURFACE at Syracuse University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Center for Policy Research by an authorized administrator of SURFACE at Syracuse University. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

It's Elementary

A Monthly Column by EFAP Director John Yinger
February 2005

Holding Accountability Programs Accountable

States obviously have an interest in ensuring that their education aid money is well spent, especially when an education finance reform leads to a large increase in state aid to some districts. Even before the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was passed in 2001, therefore, most states had implemented a school accountability program. Most of these programs are based on student performance, and some of them involve rewards and sanctions based on the level or change in a school's or school district's test scores.

The key challenge facing any school accountability program is that it is difficult to separate the impact on student performance of factors **inside** a school or school district's control, such as its choice of a curriculum or management system, from the factors **outside** its control, such as the amount of aid it receives or its concentration of disadvantaged students. The share of students passing a standardized test obviously reflects both types of factors, so an accountability system that simply rewards or punishes schools or districts based on test scores is inherently unfair and ineffective. It makes no sense, after all, to punish a district because it has a high concentration of disadvantaged students or a large influx of immigrant children who do not speak English—and therefore has relatively low test scores. It also makes no sense to punish a particular school with low test scores if that school has not received its fair share of revenue from its district or its district has not received its fair share of revenue from the state.

Unfortunately, no existing accountability system provides a clear solution to this problem. Some states provide a partial solution by dividing districts into classes based on poverty and enrollment and then basing rewards and sanctions only on within-class comparisons. Attempts by states to move in this direction have been undercut, however, by NCLB, which bases its rankings and sanctions exclusively on changes in test scores. NCLB also imposes separate target performance levels for several different student categories; this approach imposes the most unfair burdens on school districts with the highest fractions of minority and low-income students.

Some people argue that an accountability system can avoid these problems by basing rewards and sanctions on **changes** in student performance. I see two problems with this argument. First, a system based on changes rewards districts that have been irresponsible in the past, and therefore have a lot of room for improvement, and punishes responsible districts that have already implemented state-of-the-art management and teaching programs. Second, districts with high concentrations of disadvantaged students must spend more than other districts to raise performance, so these districts are penalized by any system that bases rewards or penalties on test-score changes alone.

Overall, there is widespread agreement that accountability systems are a good idea, but no consensus on the best way to design them. Moreover, the scholarly literature does not provide much support for the

conclusion that existing accountability systems, even those based on changes in test scores, can raise student performance in a state, holding expenditure constant. Perhaps the main lesson from the scholarly literature is that an accountability system is bound to fail unless it recognizes the role of factors outside a school's or district's control, such as the share of students from poor families or with limited English proficiency.

Another important challenge facing school accountability systems is limited knowledge about the best curricular and management programs to implement. In many cases, the problem is not that schools are refusing to select programs that are known to work, but is instead that that nobody knows what programs are needed to bring a particular school or school district up to the state's performance standard. School districts cannot be expected to solve this problem on their own, that is, they cannot be expected to set up research department or to conduct formal program evaluations.

In my view, it is a state's responsibility to provide information on existing research, and to conduct new research, concerning the effectiveness of various curricular and management programs and then to provide this information to school districts. In other words, any school accountability system must begin by holding the state accountable for the provision of good information.

This perspective provides another reason to be cautious about imposing rewards and penalties on schools or districts with low test scores or with test scores that do not improve. If a district has implemented every curricular and management program known to boost test scores and is being run in an effective manner, it does not make any sense to penalize it. Instead, it makes sense for its state to search for additional programs that will help that district and districts like it.

Accountability systems for school districts and individual schools can serve an important public purpose; indeed, all students deserve to attend schools that make the most of the resources available to them. Nevertheless, accountability systems are unlikely to be effective until they both hold states accountable for providing adequate funding and good information to all districts and avoid penalizing poor, urban school districts for factors outside their control.